



# Cervical Screening

A guide for healthcare professionals

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## Background

The Survivors Trust and The Eve Appeal are collaborating as part of the **#CheckWithMeFirst campaign** to help raise awareness of the small but crucial adjustments healthcare professionals like you can make to help make healthcare more accessible to survivors of rape, sexual abuse and sexual violence.



**1 in 4 girls**

experience childhood sexual abuse

**1 in 3 adult women**

experience sexual violence at  
some time in their life



Many survivors of rape, sexual assault or sexual abuse find healthcare appointments and physical examinations difficult, triggering and anxiety-inducing. Some survivors find healthcare appointments so distressing that they actively avoid making or attending cervical screening appointments.

## How can you help?

This guide outlines some simple actions healthcare professionals can take to make cervical screening appointments easier for patients and service-users who are survivors of rape or sexual abuse.

# Tips for healthcare professionals

If you're a healthcare professional who performs cervical screening, you will know that many people find cervical screening tests uncomfortable, stressful, and even traumatic.

However, for survivors of sexual abuse or other psychological trauma, these appointments may be **particularly difficult** and can sometimes trigger unwanted thoughts and memories of abuse.

Triggering elements of screening can include: the invasive and intimate nature of the examination; the language used; the sense of an unequal power dynamic between healthcare professional and patient; physical pain; and much more. This can lead to **severe distress, dissociation** and can further **re-traumatise** the individual.

With 1 in 6 people experiencing sexual abuse in their lifetime, it's likely that you will be screening and examining people who are survivors of rape and sexual trauma on a regular basis.

Over the next three pages, we've outlined 12 simple actions you can do to help make your patients and service-users, many of whom will be survivors of sexual violence or abuse, feel more comfortable during cervical screening.

**The SMALLEST action by a healthcare professional can make a BIG difference to a survivor's experience.**



# 12 SIMPLE ACTIONS to help make cervical screening more accessible for survivors of sexual violence or abuse



1. At the beginning of the appointment ask the service-user if there is **anything that you can do to make the appointment easier** for them.
2. Ask if there is any **language** that they find triggering that you should avoid.
3. Remind them that **they are in control** of the situation, and that they can stop at any time and for any reason. This will help empower and give control back to the individual.
4. Agree with the service-user beforehand on a **signal** that they can use **to stop the test**. For example, they could raise their hand.
5. Ask the person if they have **any questions** about the procedure. Not understanding what is happening can lead to feelings of powerlessness.
6. Let them know that there is **no pressure to go ahead** with the examination/screening, and that you can always try again at another time.



- 7.** Explain **what they should expect**, show them the equipment you will use and **remind them of each next step** during the procedure - this helps to avoid any feelings of surprise!
- 8.** Ask for **consent** before touching the person, and use as **gentle** a touch as possible. This gives the individual a chance to give consent to what is happening at every step.
- 9.** They may find it helpful to **guide the speculum in themselves**, so let them know this is an option.
- 10.** **Check in on them regularly** during the procedure and reassure them that they are in control of the situation.
- 11.** Using the **smallest speculum size** may make the procedure more comfortable.
- 12.** **Avoid using a persuasive tone of voice**, as this may remind the person of a perpetrator of abuse.

**Remember that not all survivors accessing cervical screening services will identify as a woman. Having inclusive information available for trans and non-binary service-users will help them to feel more comfortable attending cervical screening appointments.**

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## Dissociation & non-verbal communication

Many survivors of sexual abuse dissociate when they are in triggering situations. Make sure to always use the person's name, as this can help to avoid this. If a service-user seems distracted, like they are not 'present', or confused, they may be dissociating. **It can help to talk to the person about what is in the room and to encourage them to engage in their five senses.** What can they see or hear? Remind them where they are, what is happening, and that they are safe.

A survivor of sexual violence or abuse experiencing a trauma-response may be unable to speak, or raise their hand, so **be aware of subtle non-verbal cues.** This highlights why action 4 is so important, as not everyone will be able to raise their hand, or speak during an appointment, so alternative signals may be needed.

## Aftercare

At the end of the screening, try to take a moment to remind the service-user to take time to look after themselves following the appointment. Acts of self care such as calling a friend or enjoying a warm drink can help ease feelings of anxiety they may have.

If a service-user has become particularly anxious or distressed it can be helpful to offer them a quiet space to help calm down before they leave, if such a space is available.

The Survivors Trust runs a **free, confidential helpline** (0808 801 0818) for anyone affected by sexual violence, including survivors and the people who work with them. You can **signpost survivors to the helpline for emotional support** following the appointment, and are welcome to use it yourself. [Click here for full details.](#)

## 5 QUESTIONS for reception staff to ask when service-users book an appointment

It's important to remember a service-user's experience begins long before they arrive at an appointment. A survivor of rape, sexual abuse or sexual assault may be particularly nervous when booking a cervical screening appointment. It may have taken months, or even years to overcome their anxiety to take this step and pick up the phone.

When booking the appointment a survivor might feel embarrassed to ask for adjustments, so it's key that administrative and reception teams help put them at ease and support them with any adjustments they need. **For any service-user booking an appointment for cervical screening it can be helpful to ask:**

1. Is there anything we can do to make this appointment easier for you?
2. Do you require a single appointment, or if you need more time we can book a double appointment?
3. Would you like to bring someone with you? (If this is possible at your service centre)
4. Would an appointment with a doctor or nurse before your screening be helpful for you?
5. Do you have a preference for the gender of the healthcare professional carrying out the screening/procedure?

**These simple questions can help a survivor of rape, sexual assault or sexual abuse feel empowered and supported from the beginning!**





## Useful links and contacts

### **The Eve Appeal**

Leading UK national charity funding research and raising awareness into the five gynaecological cancers - womb, ovarian, cervical, vulval and vaginal.

**Click here to visit The Eve Appeal website** ([eveappeal.org.uk](http://eveappeal.org.uk))

Ask Eve helpline: 0808 802 0019

Email: [nurse@eveappeal.org.uk](mailto:nurse@eveappeal.org.uk)

### **The Survivors Trust**

Membership organisation representing over 120 specialist support services for survivors of rape, sexual abuse, and sexual violence in the UK.

**Click here to visit The Survivors Trust website**

([www.thesurvivorstrust.org](http://www.thesurvivorstrust.org))

Helpline: 08088 010818 (For survivors, professionals, family and supporters)

Email: [info@thesurvivorstrust.org](mailto:info@thesurvivorstrust.org)

### **#CheckWithMeFirst**

- **Click here** to view our #CheckWithMeFirst animation
- **Click here** to download the #CheckWithMeFirst Grounding Techniques resource for survivors from The Survivors Trust website
- **Click here** to download a template survivors can take with them to their cervical screening appointment
- **Click here** to download our Cervical Screening guide for survivors from The Survivors Trust website.

The Survivors Trust's **#CheckWithMeFirst** training provides healthcare practitioners and patient-facing staff with the tools to provide trauma-informed care for survivors accessing healthcare.

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Join our training to discover how small changes can make a big difference; helping to reduce missed appointments, managing vicarious trauma, and improving healthcare outcomes.

Get in touch with us via email –  
[nhs.checkwithmefirst@thesurvivorstrust.org](mailto:nhs.checkwithmefirst@thesurvivorstrust.org)



*If you would prefer this guide in an alternative format, please contact us.*